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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 005350

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SUBJECT: FURTHER CLARIFICATION OF VILLEPIN'S STATEMENT ON  
TURKEY-EU NEGOTIATIONS

REF: PARIS 5307

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

11. (C) Summary: Challenged to explain Prime Minister de Villepin's August 2 remarks on Turkish accession to the EU (reftel), MFA Acting European Director and Assistant to the PM's EU Advisor defended them as a justified response to the Turkish statement on its non-recognition of Cyprus. Both officials told Pol Deputy Aug. 4 that Villepin's radio comments were intended to make clear to Turkey and French public opinion that the final results of beginning EU accession negotiations with Turkey should not be taken for granted, without foreclosing eventual Turkish accession either. Our interlocutors predictably downplayed the importance of jockeying between Prime Minister de Villepin and Interior Minister Sarkozy in advance of the 2007 presidential elections, while noting the strong opposition of the government's center-right electoral base to eventual Turkish accession. Neither interlocutor contended that France intends to block the opening of accession negotiations on Oct. 3; Villepin had not referred to any "precondition," it was pointed out. They were careful to state that France's position needed to be defined in consultation with its European partners, and that Villepin had after all identified a real problem that would need to be solved before any eventual Turkish EU accession. We will continue to monitor this closely, of course, but as of now, what we are being told is that the GOF bottom line is not to require Turkish recognition of Cyprus before Oct. 3. Rather, the GOF will insist that the EU make clear to the Turks at an early stage, perhaps at the very outset, of the need to resolve the Cyprus issue in the course of negotiations. Significantly, FM Douste-Blazy, in a Le Monde interview dated August 5, addresses the Turkish accession issue in a slightly less provocative way than Villepin did in his radio interview two days before. The MFA had already in its hands a report of EUR PDAS Volker's discussions with the French Embassy. End Summary.

12. (C) In the August absence of higher-ranking officials, Pol Deputy met separately August 4 with Acting European Cooperation Director Caroline Ferrari and PM Economic Advisor Assistant Rainier d'Haussonville to seek an explanation for Villepin's August 2 statement on possible new conditions for the opening of EU accession negotiations with Turkey on October 3 (reftel). He sought confirmation that ambiguities in the French position -- notwithstanding the hard line taken vis-a-vis French public opinion and internal political jockeying -- did not mean France would insist on setting new preconditions or would close the door on opening negotiations. Ferrari was cognizant of USG concerns, and specifically of PDAS Volker's contacts in Washington August 3 with the French Embassy on the subject.

Turks guilty, French serious  
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13. (C) Ferrari blamed Turkey for creating "confusion" with its unilateral statement after both France and the Presidency had warned Ankara against it. France had been forced to respond, with PM Villepin communicating his "thinking" on the subject. Asked whether it was true that President Chirac, as reported in the press, had supported Villepin's statement in the August meeting of the Council of Ministers, she affirmed that this was indeed the case. (Note: When asked to confirm, the Elysee spokesperson had responded "no comment." Ferrari explained that confirmation of Chirac's position was left to the Prime Minister's spokesperson, presumably so as not to contradict earlier Presidential statements in favor of Turkish accession). She was nonetheless careful to state that France's "position" still needed to be defined in consultation with its European partners. The Turkish statement was a "new" element that would need to be taken into consideration.

14. (C) D'Haussonville said Villepin had identified a real problem that would need to be solved before any eventual Turkish EU accession. Like Ferrari, he argued that Turkey's statement represented a new, if not surprising, element, the legal and other ramifications of which needed to be studied and discussed with France's other EU partners. In responding

to the Turkish declaration, Villepin was also making clear to the French people that any negotiations with Turkey would be rigorous. To be credible, negotiations could not be viewed as a mere formality with a pre-determined outcome.

Avoiding the words "new preconditions"

15. (C) Asked whether this meant that France was not then intent on setting new preconditions for the opening of negotiations, d'Haussonville pointed out that Villepin had not once used the word "precondition." He added that Villepin's statements in no way contradicted previously expressed French views on eventual Turkish EU accession. France had always insisted that any negotiations be rigorous and serious and that the accession of Turkey be in France's and in Europe's interest. He did not object when Pol Deputy interpreted his statements as meaning that France might well insist that the EU make certain things clear to Turkey at the beginning or in the course of negotiations, but likely would not attempt to add new preconditions or delay the opening of negotiations.

Political jockeying secondary, domestic concerns real

16. (C) Asked about domestic considerations, Ferrari responded that the government had to take into account the results of the failed EU constitutional referendum. The French people had made clear their concerns about Europe's borders. She brushed off Pol Deputy's interjection that the French constitutional amendment subjecting future new EU members (after Bulgaria and Romania) to a popular referendum appeared to provide all the protection needed. She also insisted that French reticence could not be interpreted as anti-Muslim in nature. She finally conceded that domestic politics were also in play, noting that the centrist UDF, the most pro-European party on the right, opposed Turkish membership in the EU, as did most of the governing center-right UMP.

17. (C) D'Haussonville repeated many of Ferrari's arguments, noting the need to take into account French unease with enlargement. He said it would be impossible to interpret France's position as anti-Muslim, given that Turkey was a secular state. He downplayed the importance of maneuvering in advance of the 2007 Presidential elections, insisting that they were still far off. Likewise, he brushed off jockeying between Villepin and Sarkozy, arguing that former PM and Chirac confidante Alain Juppe had expressed -- before Sarkozy -- his opposition to Turkish membership. This was a view shared by most in the UMP, whether pro- or anti-Sarkozy.

Next steps

18. (C) On process, Ferrari said the Commission had proposed a negotiating framework in early July which had yet to be approved by the Council. So far, COREPER had held one superficial debate. She claimed the issue was not yet on the agenda for the August 25 COREPER meeting. The informal Gymnich meeting of Foreign Ministers would thus present the first real opportunity for more discussion, although it was not empowered to take any decisions. The only requirement was that a decision be reached by October 2.

Comment

19. (C) We noted previously that Villepin's remarks appeared to reflect both a repositioning of French policy following the referendum and prepositioning in advance of the 2007 Presidential elections (reftel). The Financial Times of August 4 asserts that Villepin was thinking particularly about the latter, and they're probably right. Villepin is seeking to register as the leader the French people (and voter) who can count on him to be tough on Turkey, even if that means ruffling feathers in the EU. He is also assuring them that the road ahead is a long one without a predetermined outcome. Our official interpreters are implying that he will not go beyond that between now and Oct. 13. We will continue to monitor closely.

STAPLETON